PEOPLE WHO GIVE

October 22, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyrerian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 12:41-48

"Every one to whom much is given, of that one will much be required;..."
-Luke 12:48b

"Whatever else it is, religion is big business. America has more clergy than Ford and Chrysler together have employees. If U. S. religion were a company it would be number five on the Fortune 500, its $50 billion of revenues putting it behind IBM and just ahead of GE." [Fortune, September 25, 1989]

That's the lead paragraph of an article in Fortune magazine, September 25 edition, "Turning Around the Lord's Business." The aim of the article was to analyze the shifting religious market in America from the perspective of management. The author proposes that strong, growing churches, regardless of their position on the conservative-liberal scale will almost always be churches that do a good job serving their members. That is, they practice good management.

The implication is that religion and good management are not often happily related in the institutional church. That's not news to church people. And the reasons are fairly simple, I think. "Management" sounds worldly and somewhere in the theological nerve center of most of us is the old idea that religion and church are not supposed to be worldly, in fact should be separate from, different from worldly enterprises, maybe even a haven, an escape, a cloister - from all that is worldly.

In any event, I read the Fortune article in September, tucked it in a file and then this week focused my attention on the text we just heard - a portion of the 12th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke - and I was struck by some connections. The passage itself is about management, about efficient, effective, faithful management of someone else's property. And it is about the particular responsibilities which fall on those who are given the wherewithal - the material resources, the education, the experience - to be managers. It is a passage about stewardship; not as a euphemism for raising money to meet the budget, but a much, much broader and deeper concept of the steward, as a model for Christian discipleship.

The opening sentence of the chapter struck me because of its similarity to Fortune magazine's lead:

"Whatever else it is, religion is big business," said Fortune.

"In the meantime, (when) so many thousands of the multitude had gathered together that they trod upon one another," said Luke. [12:1]

And it occurred to me that just maybe everything that follows is addressed to that - that sudden success, that unexpected bigness, all those people. Here they were a small group of very modest people. Maybe 13, probably 20 at the most, and following them at this point were so many people, they were tramping on each other. There is, perhaps, temptation, but also something demanding about that kind of success and popularity.

And it further occurred to me that one could argue that the Christian Church has been far better at handling adversity then it has handled success: that the periods of persecution have brought the best out of us, while times of prosperity have made us small and petty. You could argue, it occurred to me, that the dilemma of the televangelism business is one not of long term, premeditated deceit, but the gradual seduction of big numbers and big dollars... and that there is a special accountability exacted of God's people during good times.

Being a Christian in that situation, said Jesus, is best described by the word "steward"... one who manages every resource at his or her disposal faithfully. That includes money, power, influence and the precious resource of one's own life.

And then Jesus added one of those brilliant, unforgettable caveats...

"Everyone to whom much is given, of that one will much be required."

That, the ethicists say, is uniquely Jesus. Most ethical systems seek out minimum requirements for all to follow, lowest common denominators - "don't kill, don't steal," for instance. Jesus is more interested in a graduated morality: a "proportionate duty" it has been called. The more you have, the more is expected of you.

My parents used to think like that. I was forever trying to persuade them to allow me to stay out later or do this or that, or to lower their behavior standards by appealing to a lower common denominator: "Nobody did well on that test," or "But Bobby's parents allow him to go," I used to say. It never worked. "You're not Bobby and we're not Bobby's parents" is the way it got resolved.

So the Old Testament prophets tell Israel that to be blessed by God - to be chosen by God - is not always easy. In fact it is demanding because God's expectations are connected to the blessing.

And Andrew Carengie, certainly no advocate of Old Testament social justice, got this one right when he said:

"This then is held to be the duty of the man of wealth...to consider all surplus revenues which come to him strictly as trust funds, which he is called upon to administer in the manner which, in his judgment, is best calculated to produce the most beneficial results for the community." [Democracy and the Gospel of Wealth, cited by Philip Wogaman, Economics and Ethics, p. 24]

Everyone to whom much is given, of that person, persons, churches, nations, will much be required. There is no more relevant word. The relevant question for us is always, "How shall I live?" How shall I live in this time and place, this world, here and now? How shall I spend out my resources, my life?

On that matter our culture is, I believe, in the middle of a critical change. In the backwash of the 1960s we turned inward. Having failed to defeat poverty, we decided that our chief end was to make as much money as possible. Having seen our hopes for peace dashed by Vietnam and Vietnam's tragic aftermath, which continues, we opted for peace of mind. Having seen the best of America's dreams confront the harsh realities of Watergate, Iran-Contra, and a conscience-numbing parade of government officials indicted for everything from peddling influence with defense contractors to simply stealing money from housing programs for the poor - we decided that a better bet might be to concentrate on self-fulfillment.

That's changing. Part of the reason is that we have tried selfishness out as a life style and discovered that it doesn't feel right. Douglas LaBier, a psychotherapist, writes a column for the Washington Post to "help hollow souls make sense of it all." His patients, he says, are "troubled winners" - people who are unhappy when they reach the top of the ladder. A life too much devoted to pursuing money, power and position and control over others ends up being emotionally impoverished. In a new book, The Hunger for More, Searching for Values in an Age of Greed, the author, Lawrence Shames, argues that the October '87 crash awakened young adults. Pre-crash, the widely accepted credo was "I believe that the pursuit of wealth is in itself exciting and engrossing and fashionable and worthy of the best part of my focus, my attention, my passion, and in return the pursuit of wealth will make me a success." October '87 corrected that. My guess is that last weekend was another reminder.

2,000 years ago Jesus observed that "life is more than possessions." We are relearning that, it seems. And if you happen to have possessions, it is a matter of very great importance to know how to handle them: to know how to own and use possessions rather than being owned and used by them. One of the saddest news items I've read recently was about English Bay, Alaska, an Aleut Indian fishing village, which has been forever changed, not only by the Exxon Valdez's oil, but by the huge amounts of money the Aleuts have earned working for Exxon to clean up the oil. "Instead of hanging salmon to dry this month, as Aleut natives have done for centuries - John was putting up a $3,000 television satellite on the bluff beside his home. A few houses away, Jeff Evans, his hair painted green, churned up the road with his new $1,500 Fat Cat motorbike, portable Stern headphones over his ears, gold jewelry flashing. In years past he would have been storing food for winter.

In English Bay there is a sharp increase in drunkenness and all the related social problems that accompany it. Even if the salmon return some authorities wonder if English Bay can survive. [New York Times, 9/18/89]

Jesus understood the potential for tragedy when men and women are seduced by the promise of success, possessions, power, as their chief end in life. Jesus taught that faithfulness to him was a matter of living for him, being possessed, not by the pursuit of wealth, but by his passionate love for the world. Living right, Jesus said, was a matter of managing things wisely, and knowing always that his expectations of us - and for us - are always in direct proportion to the prosperity and success we enjoy.

It is a relevant word for us today. Stewardship is the word we use to describe raising money for the church... and while we are big business, the amounts are relatively modest. A few dollars more per member per week - a generous taxi tip - the cost of a few drinks - would make the difference for most churches. My impatience with that kind of stewardship is that the issue is huge: it is how to use everything: how to manage all my possessions. Get that one right and you'll find yourself giving away unheard of amounts of money to the church and loving it! Writes Douglas John Hall, "Stewardship challenges us to a life of worldly responsibility... to think stewardship today is to think in very bold terms. It is to be plummeted into the center of the spiritual struggle of late 20th century humanity, the struggle to find a future that is neither the pretentious lordship of the universe that leads with a dread logic to oblivion, nor, on the other hand, the cowardly shrinking away from all thought, planning and action that arrives at change."

Much of the New Testament is written with a sense of a deadline approaching. The writers clearly believed that in their own lifetime they would witness the return of Jesus Christ and the summation of history. The recurrent theme of an absent landowner who entrusts the estate to a steward and returns suddenly and unexpectedly to demand an accounting was a powerful idea for the early Christian Church. The name for that kind of thinking is eschatology and it makes us, frankly, uncomfortable. For one thing, the end did not come as the New Testament writers anticipated. And ever since there have been many, many preachers, prophets and not a few charlatans who have reckoned the day of the Lord's return and the end of history and built their reputations, and scared a lot of people and diverted attention from Jesus' lead priority - namely life in this world. Embarrassed by these excesses we Presbyterians ignore it, gloss over it as quickly as possible. I'd like to bring it back in this morning, cautiously, not as a threat, or even an approaching deadline before which you and I had better get our lives together or else - although that has always been a fairly effective fund raising device. I'd like to bring it back in as the wisdom to see that our lives have a vertical as well as a horizontal dimension. We do live in a portion of God's eternity. Our lives are made precious by reason of the fact that they have a beginning and an ending. History may not come to an end soon... but you and I most certainly do live in a limited dimension of history.

I see no divine intentionality in a random earthquake and a highway collapsing and I profoundly disagree with anyone who does. But I was

reminded this week that we do live within perimeters: and that because of that, life is very, very precious.

The Judeo-Christian faith, which I claim as my own, reminds me that all I have is on loan for a while. The earth is the Lord's - not mine. I'm a steward for a few decades. All I own, really and truly, is my life: a segment of God's eternity, given to me with no strings attached, no condition. My daily task is to live it as fully and thoroughly and faithfully as I can. My choice, my commitment is to live it in gratitude to God who gave it to me, and in responsible stewardship, acknowledging that because I have been given so very much, much is expected of me, by God.

That includes the resources I give - the money I give to the church, and the agencies in the city I believe in.

It includes how I use my time and energy and how I invest my love.

It includes the whole estate - my life - a piece of God's eternity put at my disposal.

This sermon on stewardship actually began last August in a conversation with a special friend. Sally died in September and because she was our close and dear friend I was asked to say a few words at her funeral.

Sally was in her early fifties, mother of three, about to be a grandmother. She loved her family without reservation. She loved and held her three children together through a very painful divorce. She loved God and the Presbyterian Church and playing tennis and a good party. She was an Elder and a Trustee in a Presbyterian Church. Ten years ago Sally developed a rare liver tumor, not malignant, but fast growing. There was no treatment. And so she got bigger and bigger, as big as a nine month pregnancy and still bigger. Finally a liver transplant seemed her only hope. So she went to the Mayo Clinic and waited. And because she was not in immediate danger she waited for six months. Her spirit and love and sense of humor never diminished.

During that time her family took turns staying with her. Her young daughter-in-law took a turn and Sally laughed about, how in three days her daughter-in-law had been thoroughly immersed in the esoteric and intense business of organ transplants, hearing lectures, reading articles, attending workshops and seminars on organ donation, organ recovery, organ transportation, organ maintenance. On Sunday morning Sally took her daughter-in-law, a non-church person, to the Presbyterian Church for worship. They sat down, opened the bulletin and then her daughter-in-law asked, "What in the world is that?" pointing to the organ offertory.

We stopped by to see Sally in August, a few weeks after her liver transplant. She was not well, a stubborn infection was turning into pneumonia. But she wanted to talk to us because she was trying to write a thank you note, anonymously, to the family of the person whose liver had been donated and transplanted. She showed me the notes she had written.

"I've come up with the concept of stewardship" she said. "That's what it is, isn't it, someone gave me their life in a manner of speaking."

It's a matter of stewardship. It's a matter of learning to live our lives like that, fully and generously and faithfully and that, Jesus taught, is a matter of managing and investing and spending out and giving - giving them away, until they are complete.

The funeral was not an easy assignment. I closed with the final passage of Julian, presented so powerfully by Linda Loving last Sunday night. At the end of the play, and near the end of her remarkable life Julian says:

"My life is a little thing
when it will end here
is God's secret.

And the world
is a little thing,

like a hazelnut
in his-her hand -

but it is in his ever-keeping,
it is in his ever-loving,
it is in his ever-making,

how should any thing be amiss?

Yes, all shall be well,
and all will be well
and thou shalt see thyself
that all manner of thing
shall be well."

That is true. That is the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All will be well. But in the meantime there is the matter of these lives of ours and how to live them fully and faithfully in God's good grace and love.

"Everyone to whom much is given, of him - of her - will much be required."

Amen.